Papers on Kennedy Assassination Are Unsealed, and '63 Is Revisited

By TIM WEINER

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 23 — Pages from the raw record of a national nightmare, committed to paper, stamped top secret and filed away for 30 years: a 1959 urinalysis of Lee Harvey Oswald; frantic requests for dossiers on the man arrested as John F. Kennedy's assassin; ballistics tests on the mail-order rifle; a scale model of the grassy knoll.

The National Archives' huge cache of Government documents on the assassination of President Kennedy was opened today, offering a treasure trove for conspiracy theorists, a wealth of arcane details for historians and a bottomless pit of memory, loss and mystery for those who recall the President's murder. Included were 90,000 pages of documents from the Central Intelligence Agency, thousands of Presidential papers, investigative files, photographs and memorandums.

Hearsay, Rumor and Innuendo

The files show how the C.I.A. scrambled in the hours after the assassination on Nov. 22, 1963, to locate dossiers on Oswald (they found 30). They record a C.I.A. official's fear that the Federal Bureau of Investigation was tailing him as he met with the mobster the C.I.A. had hired to kill Fidel Castro. They include a thousand shards of evidence, and thousands more of hearsay, rumor, gossip, innuendo and nonsense.

Since thousands of C.I.A. records and other materials remain classified, pieces are still missing from the puzzle. And the information disclosed amounted to less than the 1,053 boxes of materials opened today; a surprisingly large number of the documents consisted of newspaper clippings stamped secret by the C.I.A. and multiple copies of the same report from different files.

Evidence for Everyone

But for those who believe that the assassination was the sole work of Oswald, an ex-marine who had failed in nearly every endeavor, including an attempt to defect to Moscow, the newly released documents offer the final proof. And for those who believe that Oswald did not act alone, the documents also offer substantiation.

"This will feed another generation of assassination buffs, the children of assassination buffs," said Edward Jay

Continued on Page A11, Column 1

Continued From Page A1

Epstein, who wrote three books and an anthology on the assassination.

Many theories have been put forward — the Soviets did it, the Cubans did it, the Mafia did it — but the files appear to hold no smoking gun. It was reaction to and revulsion toward an unusually ornate assassination theory — the 1991 movie "JFK" directed by Oliver Stone, which posits that a team of military officers and intelligence officials plotted the killing — that prompted Congress to order the files opened by today.

Most of the documents pored over all day by researchers and reporters were long-secret materials reviewed by two Government commissions that had studied the assassination.

The Warren Commission ruled in 1964 that Oswald, acting alone, killed the President with two shots from a cheap mail-order rifle fired from the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository in downtown Dallas.

A House select committee concluded in 1979 that Oswald killed the President with two shots, but that there was evidence to support a theory that a third shot may have come from a grassy knoll across the plaza.

'Reasonable People' Disagree

Among the Warren Commission's most controversial findings was what conspiracy theorists have ridiculed as the "magic bullet" conclusion — that one of the shots Oswald fired passed through the President, struck Mr. Connally in the back, exited through his chest, passed through his right wrist, entered his left thigh and later showed up, largely intact, on a hospital stretcher. Conspiracy theorists say one bullet could not have traveled so tortuous a route and sustained so little damage.

"A reasonable person could conclude either that Oswald acted alone or that there was a second shooter," said G. Robert Blakey, chief counsel to the House committee. "The single best explanation was that if there were a second shooter, there was involvement of organized crime."

That latter explanation has fueled fascinated speculation.

The organized-crime element to which Mr. Blakey referred was a New Orleans faction presided over by Santo Trafficante Jr., who died in 1987. The material made public today includes C.I.A. documents describing how the agency's leaders in 1960 asked an organized crime figure, Johnny Roselli, to arrange for "the liquidation of Fidel Castro," which the documents described as "a sensitive mission requiring gangster-type action." Mr. Roselli, in turn, asked for the help of Mr. Trafficante who undertook several failed plots to kill Mr. Castro.

After the Kennedy assassination, Mr. Roselli's contact in the C.I.A. became nervous about meeting him in public, certain that the F.B.I. was spying on the meetings, the documents show. Mr. Roselli's body was found in a 55-gallon oil drum floating off the Florida coast in 1976.

Mr. Blakey was at the archive today, reviewing the old files with a practiced eye. "None of this material is entirely new," he said. "The Warren Commission had access to most of this stuff, and what they didn't have access to, we had access to in 1979. This is not a current event. This is a historical footnote."

But he said the boxes offered many examples of material that should have been disclosed but was kept secret, and vice versa. He cited as an example of the first an uncorroborated assertion that a woman who had worked at the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City had had a sexual liaison with Oswald two months before the assassination.

Other researchers noted the continuing classification of files on a C.I.A. plan code-named ZR Rifle, which contemplated the assassination of foreign leaders. The plan was referred to, but not detailed by, the 1979 House assassination committee.

Fueling Public Distrust

Because President Clinton has not appointed an independent panel to review the documents, as was called for by Congress last year, the agencies that created the secrets are allowed to decide what secrets to keep, Mr. Blakey said.

David W. Belin, counsel to the Warren Commission and the executive director of the Rockefeller Commission, which also examined the assassination, said today's release was "only the first step." He called on the C.I.A. to make public all its files on the case.

"With the public distrust of government, the need to restore public trust far outweighs any need for secrecy," he said. He added that the "misrepresentations of the truth by Hollywood," could only be rectified by a complete disclosure of all the Government has known about the case.

Mr. Belin also said it was particularly important for the C.I.A. to release all its files because the agency had violated an order from President Lyndon B. Johnson by withholding some documents from the Warren Commission nearly 30 years ago.